

Flying Crow

BY ELMORE ELLIOTT PEAKE

HE was a full-blooded Assiniboin Indian, his tribe being the lesser of the two tribes composing the Sioux or Dakotan division—perhaps the fiercest, cruelest, nearest to devils in human form, of all American aborigines, preying on white man and red man alike, and sparing not even allied tribes of the great Siouan linguistic stock. For some offence, the nature of which Indian superstition had persistently veiled from the white man's eyes, Flying Crow had been ostracized by his clan; or, more likely, he had fled to escape a sentence of death, the execution of which, under the peculiar circumstances, would have been an ineffaceable blot on the family escutcheon.

This had happened a quarter of a century before. When the Assiniboin had moved farther west, before the encroaching wave of civilization, Flying Crow had remained behind—and was submerged. He allowed the village of Buckhorn to come up almost to his cabin door; he put on the white man's stuffy clothes and laid away his graceful native garb. He replaced his comfortable moccasins with stiff shoes—after removing their heels; he quite needlessly covered his glossy black hair, which of itself was invulnerable to sun and rain, with a felt hat. And when frontier humor inevitably dubbed him *Jim* Crow, he gravely accepted the new cognomen.

His cabin was sequestered as skilfully as a partridge's nest in the heart of a little grove just outside the town. It contained one room, with an earthen floor. The furnishings were a few skins of birds and beasts, clusters of dried herbs, including tobacco, a birch-bark receptacle containing his native costume—carefully stowed away in one corner—traps, fishing-tackle, and a gun. No table, chairs, or bed. He slept on a single buffalo-skin. In fair weather he cooked out-of-doors, over an open fire; in foul

weather, inside, letting the smoke escape as best it could, and complacently squatting to his meals in an atmosphere which would have suffocated a white man, or made him weep his eyes out at the least.

But Flying Crow was no recluse. His figure was a familiar one on the streets—bulky, but with muscle, not fat; straight as an arrow, in spite of his sixty-five years; and with an odd gait, when his feet were hampered with shoes, between a shuffle and a dog-trot, one foot falling in front of the other, with toes slightly in-turned. Not a graceful gait, but one that devoured the miles with a voracity which few white men could match.

He called at the post-office every day, just like any other citizen; would patiently work his way up to the delivery-window in the slow-moving line, and then ask, "Anything Flying Crow?" Of course there was no one to write to this piece of unlettered human flotsam, adrift without chart or compass on the sea of an alien civilization; and when the clerk answered, as he always did, "Nothing to-day, Jim," the old warrior would gravely bow and pass out with irreproachable dignity, his head in the air, his black eyes looking straight ahead over his hawklike nose, his wide, mobile mouth—the mouth of a natural orator—set in a straight line.

One day some wags fixed up a bogus letter for him. But they got small satisfaction out of the joke as they waited in grinning expectancy about the office. Without betraying his intense surprise by so much as the accelerated motion of an eyelid, Flying Crow gravely picked up the letter, leisurely scanned the superscription, after the manner of a white man—though he knew not one character from another—and then tucked it in his pocket. Far from suspecting a joke, he hastened back to his cabin with considerable inward perturbation. For a letter was an uncanny thing, able to tell one

white man what another white man wanted him to know. For instance, if you started with, say, eight quarts of fire-water and a letter, from a white man's saloon, destined to a white man's ranch, and drank one quart on the way, the letter, even though tucked in the bottom of your deepest pocket, would see you and tell on you. This he knew by experience. So, evidently, the spirits had something to do with letters.

He pinned his to the unplastered wall of his cabin, and spent the balance of the day squatted on the opposite side of the room, smoking and studying the strange thing which had come to him, and watching closely to see whether or not it would move. On the evening of the second day he opened it, with considerable hesitation. On the third day he called in Zach Henderson, his nearest neighbor. Zach was no scholar himself, but he could read a little on a pinch, given plenty of time.

"This hyere letter says, Jim," announced Zach, finally, "that if you'll call at Barrymore's saloon in Reedville, you'll git a quart of whiskey. But in my opinion you *won't*. In my opinion this hyere letter, which ain't signed or nothin', is a *joke*."

Flying Crow smoked stolidly on, without a word. Possibly he resented Henderson's slight valuation of this the first letter of his life. Perhaps he was impressed with the fact that the letter talked about whiskey—a subject which, to his sorrow, he had never known a letter to lie about. And, finally, there is no doubt that he was exceedingly loath to neglect the remotest chance of acquiring a quart of this liquor for nothing. So, with that childlike credulity which blends so strangely in the Indian with the profoundest craft, he rose before daylight the next morning and left the cabin. At half past seven he entered the saloon in Reedville, twenty-two miles from Buckhorn, and laid the letter on the bar.

Barrymore read it through, spat a group of flies with his damp towel, took a reflective pull or two at his cigar, and then glanced at the impassive face of the Indian, with whom he had a slight acquaintance.

"Walk over, Jim?" he finally inquired.

"Yes."

"Let's see your shoes."

Flying Crow promptly hoisted a very dusty foot.

"When'd you start?"

"Before the first meadow-lark whistled."

Barrymore turned and wrapped up a quart of his cheapest whiskey. This was the kind of a joke that he would not be a partner to. With a profound bow, lit up, however, by a perceptible twinkle of his jetty eyes, and supplemented by an unctuous "*Thank!*" Flying Crow departed.

He was home again by one o'clock. About sunset he swallowed the last of the poison, hurled the bottle with a whoop against the wall, and then sank in a heap on the floor, where he lay all night.

He would accept food and old clothes just as unblushingly as he had accepted this whiskey. Indeed, he was an inveterate beggar. But not after the manner of the white specimen. Instead of slinking around to a back door, giving a scarcely audible rap, and mumbling a servile petition for something to eat, he would stalk up to the front door, administer a single thunderous knock that would tax the hinges, and, when the startled housekeeper appeared, emit the word "*Bread!*" in a loud voice. Many a timid woman, who habitually turned away tramps, would succumb to this method of attack.

But it was not a studied method with Flying Crow. He was acting as naturally as the babe who extends its hands for your watch. If his request was granted he sonorously pronounced the single word "*Thank!*" which he seemed to regard as equivalent to a coin. If refused, he replied with equal sonority, "*No thank!*" and turned haughtily away, but without ill humor.

Because he begged, a good many people took it for granted that Flying Crow had no pride. But he did have pride, a vast pride, with which it was dangerous to tamper. It was of the Indian variety, however, and did not forbid begging—which, in his political economy, was one of the legitimate means of acquisition. What his pride forbade was *work*—that is, the submitting of himself to another man's dictation. Hence people called him lazy. But he would hunt and trap

all winter—sleeping on the frozen ground, fasting two or three days at a stretch, and tramping forty or fifty miles between sunrise and sunset; in short, suffering hardships which would speedily have laid a white man in his grave—this he would do to earn about as much money as thirty days of regular employment would have brought him. Then he would worse than throw it away, in a few weeks at the most, over the bar and the poker-table!

No wonder people lost patience with him. But could the poor unfortunate have seen through a white man's eyes he would not have been an Indian; and could his race have seen through white men's eyes it would not have melted away under the newcomers' régime as the mist melts under the sun. Truly, Flying Crow's civilization was but the thinnest veneer—a mere aping of the white man's external life, which he, transported to the wilderness again, would have forgotten in a day. But there was this to be said in his favor: in spite of his fierce ancestry, he was as mild-mannered a citizen as there was in Buckhorn; and in spite of his two glaring vices, which he practised, periodically, with a fury of intemperance unknown to the Caucasian, it was seldom that he was noisy, and seldom still that he quarrelled with any one, even over the card-table.

Every one knew the sordid details of Flying Crow's life. But few or none were those who ever caught a glimpse of his higher nature, or, indeed, suspected its existence. Yet the evidence, at the end, goes to show that he had a nobility of soul which dwarfed that of any white man in Buckhorn. Those who laughed at his title of Big Chief might profitably have paused to reflect on the vigor of body, firmness of character, and strength of intellect necessary to raise an Indian to the headship of that wild, passionate, liberty-loving crew who acknowledged no hereditary rights, and must be governed by personal prowess alone.

The white man was busy from morning till night, counting his dimes, laying away his dollars. But Flying Crow spent hours alone, with only the companionship of his pipe, pondering over the mysteries of that Nature which he loved so well—of the coming and the going of

the birds, the annual donning and doffing of the trees' leafy vesture, the succession of night and day. He heard the voice of the Great Spirit in the southing wind, the dashing rain, the sudden clap of thunder. To him winter was a myriad-fanged wolf from out the frozen north, and lucky was he who escaped the ravening beast. The sun was a ball of fire, which some day would accidentally fall and consume the earth. Why not?

In the post-office had hung a poster advertising a Western railroad. It depicted a scene in the Rocky Mountains, with a fir-tree, tepee, camp-fire, and two Indians—a naked young brave and his comely squaw—in the foreground; in the centre lay a sunlit valley, dotted with grazing buffalo; high over the valley, yet below the elevated camp, an eagle soared; beyond towered a wall of snow-capped mountains. Before this poster, if no one were about, the red man would stand for fifteen minutes at a time, as immovable as a shaft of granite; until finally the postmaster, touched by a worship which he could scarcely comprehend, told him to take the treasure home.

The fascination of the picture for Flying Crow proved an abiding one, winter and summer, by day and by night. Especially when food was exhausted and he was hungry—which happened oftener than his fellow townsmen imagined—would he sit with unblinking eyes and watch the haunch of antelope roasting over the fire. Sometimes he would even go closer and sniff it. Did it recall some scene of his childhood? Or did it go still farther back and wake some ancestral memory of the days before the disturbing white man had come, before Flying Crow's people had left the mountains and become dwellers of the plains? Did his wild blood, untamable as a stag's, leap in his veins at this memorial of a glorious past?

Once he lay sick of a fever for a week, without food or drink. No one came to investigate, for so erratic were his habits that his absence from the streets for days or weeks at a time never caused alarm. During this forlorn and hopeless period he would lie for hours with his hot, bright eyes fixed on the poster; and occasionally a smile would flit over the face which countless generations of war, ra-

pine, hunger and thirst, heat and cold, torture and untimely death, in his racial history, had lined so deeply—a smile which softened his stern features as a passing sunbeam softens the flinty face of a boulder. And when finally the flame of life flickered low, and the end apparently approached, he tottered across the room, wrapped his beloved picture in a silver-fox skin, and lay down with it in his arms—a sign that it was to be buried with him.

He was discovered a few hours later, by mere chance, and nursed back to life again. The doctor knew that the disease was typhoid fever; but, so damaging is a bad reputation, the majority of Buckhorners jocosely attributed their copper-skinned brother's "close call" to a tremendous spree.

Flying Crow supposed that the grove in which he lived was his by right of occupancy; but the legal title was held by Wiley Dayton, Mayor of Buckhorn, a philanthropist in a quiet way, and one of the few Westerners who believed that occasionally other than a dead Indian might be a good Indian. One day he gave Flying Crow a shoat and half a dozen chickens, and accompanied them with an earnest lecture on the pleasure and profit of raising such useful animals. Dayton's friends scouted his quixotic experiment, and predicted an immediate carnival of pork and fowl at the cabin, for it was the Crow's custom to dispose of any eatables or drinkables which fell into his hands in the shortest possible time, trusting the replenishment of his larder to Providence.

But as if to set these sceptical prophets at naught, Flying Crow at once busied himself with housing his valuable acquisitions, sparing scarcely time for his daily trip to the post-office. His ideas were strictly original. He built the pig a lean-to against his cabin; and the poultry-yard, made of poles stuck in the ground, like a stockade, opened into his back door, to give the fowls, when they should begin to lay—as Dayton had promised they would—easy access to the bark nests along the inside wall of the domicile. These arduous tasks done, the incipient farmer spent the greater part of his days on a soap-box in the centre of the enclosure, where, oblivious of the

fiery sun, he gravely smoked and observed his "stock."

Did these animals recognize in this untutored child of the wilderness a kinship which the white man disdained to own? Verily it seemed so, for within a week the pig, grunting contentedly, would root between its master's legs or pillow its head upon his feet. The rooster would fly upon his knee, loudly clap its wings, and emit a lusty *cock-a-doodle-doo*; and the hens would lie quietly in their dust-baths while the bronzed hands stroked their feathers.

It was the Crow's practice, in the beginning, to drive the pig and chickens into the cabin at night for security. But Dayton persuaded him, after several interviews, that this precaution was unnecessary; adding, with a humor which slipped harmlessly from the brave, that such close confinement might be detrimental to the health of the animals. How little the mayor dreamed of the fatal consequences with which this wholesome piece of advice was to be fraught!

Flying Crow slept as lightly as a weasel. In fact, in this respect he was the same man who, in his younger days, lay down to sleep in the forest with the deer and other wild folk, not knowing whether he would rise in the morning or remain there stark and cold, with his scalp dangling from an enemy's belt. The least wind in the night, the gnawing of a mouse, the patter of bird or squirrel on the roof, yea, the scratching of a fallen autumn leaf, would rouse him—not as a white man rouses, blunderingly, drowsily, with a start, but motionlessly, noiselessly, with lids stealthily lifting until assured that no lynx-eyed foe was waiting his awakening as a signal to strike or spring.

Yet, light as was his sleep, a marauder came one night and went, unheard, and in the morning the pig was gone. The bereft owner betrayed no emotion as he gazed into the empty sty. He simply lit his pipe, that unfailing solace, and smoked and smoked and smoked. The cock flew to his knee and crowed—unheeded. The hens crooned at his elbow, as if in sympathy, without once diverting his black eyes from their fixity of deep reflection. And that day he did not go down-town.

But that night, in the light of the moon, he took up the trail of the thief, which lay beneath his practised eye as plain as any path, and followed it to the edge of the grove; thence across a field of clover, a field of oats, a weedy pasture, and other fields and pastures, in a great half-circle, to the farther side of town. He finally paused some rods from the shanty of a ne'er-do-well named Blueskin Diggory.

Diggory himself was a man of considerable nocturnal activity, as Flying Crow well knew. So, with the infinite, tireless caution of the wild animal stalking its prey, the Indian stood in the shadow of some sumac-bushes for nearly half an hour. Then, with catlike tread, and a progress so slow as to have been almost imperceptible even to watching eyes, he approached the open door of the ramshackle shed attached to the house, and peered within. The first thing his eyes met was the white form of his pig, all scraped and dressed, and hung up by the hind legs.

He slipped away as noiselessly as he had come, without attempting to recover his property. But when he appeared at the post-office the next day he was even graver and more dignified than usual. Blueskin Diggory, who chanced to be standing near the door, chewed vigorously on his quid to hide his perturbation, and had his knife ready in case of a sudden assault. But Flying Crow did not give him a glance, although he had noted him well.

A week passed, during which the red man, even to the careless eyes of his fellow citizens, was under some unusual spell—fighting the demon of his appetite for liquor, it was popularly believed. Then, one night, his chickens disappeared—without a sound, the skilful and experienced thief supposed. But could his eyes have penetrated the dusky interior of the cabin, the door of which gaped wide, as always in the summer-time, he would have been vouchsafed a sight that would have given his nerves a decidedly bad turn—the huge, motionless form of Flying Crow, standing in the centre of the room.

A white man would have pounced upon the thief. But the way of the white man is not the way of the Indian. Flying

Crow lay down again and went instantly to sleep. The next day he made his usual trip down-town. He met his friend Dayton on the street, and saluted him with his customary respectful gravity. But he dropped no hint of his losses. As he passed Renway's saloon, through whose swinging, green-baize doors he had passed so often, to the detriment of body and soul, he refused an invitation to take a drink—to the amazement of the whittling and expectorating loafers tilted against the front of the building.

That night, instead of retiring at dark, as was his habit, he sat for hours in the now deserted chicken-yard, and burned out pipe after pipe, until even his seasoned tongue began to blister. He was weighing Blueskin Diggory in the balances of Fate. Statutes, courts, and constables—all the intricate machinery of white man's justice—were unknown, at least uncomprehended, by him. Of society and the State, and the individual's duty thereto, he had no understanding; and that they could be interested or concerned in the issue between him and Diggory did not cross his mind. They had not kept Diggory from Flying Crow's property. Why should they keep Flying Crow from Diggory's body? Thus he might have reasoned had he reasoned at all. But the case was too simple, to him, to require reasoning. The squirrel which ventures to suck the hawk's eggs must not complain when the hawk's talons pierce his heart.

He sat on his soap-box until the moon had become a great red disk low on the horizon, emitting only a weird, sinister light which seemed to portend deeds of blood. Then he entered his cabin and threw off the habiliments of civilization. From the birch-bark receptacle in the corner he took out his moccasins, his fringed shirt and trousers, his fillet of eagle's feathers, and his war-paint. Solemnly, as one performing a religious rite—little less than such, indeed, it was to him—he put on these long-disused garments and painted his face. Then making a tiny fire in the centre of the floor, he took his tomahawk in his right hand and his scalping-knife in his left, and began the dance.

At first he merely walked around the fire, slowly and sedately. Then, increas-

ing his pace until it became a trot, he began a series of low, guttural, rhythmic grunts. As his blood grew hotter, he circled faster and faster, until at last he leaped in the air and brandished his weapons; and his rude chant, now pitched in a higher key and flowing fast, was interspersed with yelps and howls, which eventually attained such a volume that Zach Henderson, a quarter of a mile away, murmured drowsily to his wife, who had also been awakened, "Jim must have on a beautiful jag to-night."

When the dance was concluded the warrior—for such he had now become—carefully covered the embers of the fire and slipped out into the night. He was gone less than an hour; but when he returned his tomahawk was dyed with blood, and Diggory was a tumbled heap in his carmined bed, the ghastly simulacrum of a man. The avenger threw himself upon his buffalo-skin, and, like a tired child, was quickly asleep.

He made no attempt to flee from justice—to use a phrase which had little or no meaning for him, for it was justice which *he*, in his opinion, had administered; and he appeared on the streets the next day as usual. The crime was not discovered until the second day, as Diggory had lived alone; and then the tell-tale wound of the scalping-knife unerringly indicated the criminal. When the sheriff, with a posse at his heels—expecting a desperate resistance—approached the cabin, it was impossible to say whether the murderer was surprised or not. He simply arose at the summons, and without entering his cabin again or even closing the door, quietly allowed himself to be led off to jail.

The trial was a brief one, for Flying Crow pleaded guilty, in spite of the remonstrance of counsel appointed by the court to defend him.

"Flying Crow killed him like a man," the old chief had said to the attorney. "Why should he now lie like a woman?"

"To keep your neck out of the noose," retorted the young lawyer.

The red man was silent, like one who has said his say. But after a moment he added, with the imperturbability of a sage: "Flying Crow has lived many moons, and is now old. If it is the Great

Spirit's will that he should come home, it is not too soon."

As may be imagined, when the judge pronounced the sentence of death, amid a breathless silence in the suffocating court-room, not a lineament of the veteran's face changed. Indeed, he was the most unconcerned person present; and one might have mistaken him for a spectator who, ignorant of the English language, had no conception of the solemnity of the occasion.

During the fortnight between his sentence and the date set for his execution, Flying Crow proved himself a model prisoner. The sheriff, reflecting the sympathy which was felt at large for the condemned man, allowed him to smoke and otherwise tempered the rigors of prison life.

"Anything you want from your cabin, Jim?" he asked one day.

"Picture and birch box," answered the other, with the brevity of his race.

When they were brought he extended his hand in token of gratitude. The box was pushed under his cot and the picture hung on the wall. Thereafter, no matter when McBride approached the cell, Flying Crow might be seen sitting with his back to the corridor and his eyes fixed on the spired fir, tepee, and smiling valley beyond. He never turned to see who passed behind him, for curiosity, in his creed, was a contemptible weakness; and he never went to the window again after some boys outside had hooted at him.

"You know where it is, that?" he asked one day, nodding toward the picture, after the sheriff had spent an hour in the cell.

"Why, yes, Jim. It says on the bottom that it's a scene in the Rockies."

The Indian shook his head, unbelievably, and his face lit with one of his rare, fleeting smiles.

"No—Happy Hunting-Grounds. Never too hot, never too cold, there. Always sunshine. Plenty antelope, plenty buffalo, plenty prairie-chickens—water—everything. *No thieves!*"

Said McBride to his wife, at supper, that night: "He's only an Injun, Nelly, I know; he don't wash reg'lar; he has always drunk and gambled like a fiend. Yit, dang me! he always makes me think

of one of them kings I used to read about when I was a little feller. I couldn't be impolite to him if I wanted to; and I'd give any man a cool hundred dollars in gold, poor as I am, to take that dirty job off of my hands on the 10th."

McBride wrestled with his conscience for several days, however, before succumbing. Then, one night, after having smoked and talked with his prisoner for an unusual length of time, he rose and said, "Well, good night, Jim," with the least tremor in his voice—for it was a desperate thing to betray the sworn trust of the people. He stepped outside the cell, and made a pretence of locking the door, but left it so that it would slowly swing open as soon as his back was turned.

He did not close his eyes that night. Even the solicitous expressions of his wife, who was disturbed from time to time by his restless tossing, were hot coals on his head; for his was a shameful secret with which her truthful ears could not be defiled. At times he fancied he heard stealthy footfalls along the corridor overhead, toward the window he had left invitingly open, only about ten feet from the ground. But he could not make sure.

He escaped from his torturous bed at the first streak of dawn; but to allay all suspicion, it was not until half past six, with the Indian's breakfast-tray in his hands, that he approached the cell, his heart thumping. The door was wide open, as he had expected; and inside, in his accustomed place, sat Flying Crow!

"Why, blast me, Jim, did I leave that door unlocked last night?" blustered McBride. "Most prisoners would have improved the opportunity to skin out."

"Not Flying Crow," answered the brave, proudly. "He does not run away and leave his friend to die in his place."

The sheriff did not find it in his heart to explain that while the Indian code might condemn a delinquent custodian to expiate the crime of an escaped prisoner, the white man's code was not so severe.

About eight o'clock the haggard sheriff, looking more like victim than ex-

cutioner, had stepped to the prisoner's cell for almost the last time.

"Jim, this—this is the day," said he, huskily.

It was a superfluous announcement, he saw at once, for Flying Crow was evidently ready for his long journey. When he had got up that morning at sunrise and cut the fifteenth notch in the rail of his cot, he knew that it was to be his last day on earth—although the unwonted noises outside would have also told him as much. Therefore he had donned, not the alien clothes of civilization, but those in which it was fitting that a warrior should die: the garments of forest, plain, and upper air—the skin of the buck, the fur of the beaver, the feathers of the eagle. If he had looked like a king to McBride in his cheap, ill-fitting cotton clothes, he looked thrice a king now; and the honest sheriff choked out, with tears in his eyes, "Jim, I'd almost as soon be in your boots as mine to-day."

When the hour had arrived they walked out side by side, without the rattle of degrading shackles—the white man with reluctant, uncertain steps; the red man with the stately tread of an emperor, his magnificent chest fearlessly lifted, and his proudly poised head, with its encircling fillet of eagle's feathers, rising half a foot above any other man's.

The crowd fell back respectfully, for he whom death has marked, no matter how contemptible he may have been in life, is invested with a dread sanctity by his average fellow man. In this instance the victim, in spite of his notorious vices, had never been contemptible; had never, so far as known, wronged any man until the night he slew Blueskin Diggory, under a provocation which, to an Indian, taught from childhood to deal out retribution with his own strong hand or else to suffer in ignominious silence, was simply irresistible.

The pair paused for a moment in the privacy of the little enclosure.

"Good-by, Jim!" said McBride, with a bone-dry throat.

"Good-by, friend," answered Flying Crow, with the smile of a father for the weakness of a beloved child.